

# Be always tender.

## About the Book

Twelve-year-old Izzy wants to be a stand-up comedian, but her life isn't exactly a barrel of laughs right now. Dad is totally absorbed with his new wife and a new baby on the way; Mom is worried about Uncle Henderson and his son, Oliver, who've moved in with them after Aunt Felicia's suicide; and now Mom's boyfriend's obnoxious teenage son, Ben, is staying with them, too!

When Uncle Henderson goes missing, Izzy, Ben, and Oliver must set aside their differences and band together on a road trip to find him before it's too late. When you go looking for family, you never know where you're going to end up finding it.

"... shows the grief, anger, and outright havoc that suicide can leave in its wake . . . Wittlinger's realistic portrayal of loss makes for a satisfying ending . . ."—*Publishers Weekly*

"The absorbing story of a girl growing up and moving beyond clichéd expectations to broader understanding"—*Booklist*

"Twens who enjoy emotion-heavy realism will relate to Izzy and enjoy this title."—*School Library Journal*



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## About the Author



Ellen Wittlinger is a former children's librarian and the author of fifteen young adult and middle-grade novels, including *Saturdays with Hitchcock*; *Hard Love*, a Printz Honor Book and a Lambda Literary Award winner; *Parrotfish*; and *Local Girl Swept Away*. Ellen has taught at Emerson College in Boston and in the Simmons University Writing for Children MFA program. She lives in western Massachusetts.

## About Friends and Family

- Chapter one shows us Izzy and Oliver together on an errand. Why do you think the author chose to start here, rather than with Izzy's whole household or family together? What do we learn about the characters who don't appear "on screen" in this chapter?
- What do you think of Izzy's friendships with Cookie and Pauline? After chapter 4, can you make some predictions about what might happen to these friendships by the end of the book? How do your predictions change after reading chapters 6 and 7?
- "Izzy wished she could shake her uncle and tell him to come back to life and take care of his kid, who was turning into a big screwed-up mess now. But kids couldn't tell grown-ups stuff like that." Have you ever felt like saying something that you couldn't because of your age?
- What do you think of Ben's tattoos? What do the other characters think of them? What do these opinions tell you about these characters?
- Why doesn't Dr. Gustino approve of Ben's Uncle Steve?

## About Loss

- "Izzy knew that life could be hard, and sometimes you were going to get hurt. A person needed to toughen up to be able to stand it. That's what she'd had to do when her dad left, and she intended to teach her cousin to toughen up too." Do you agree with Izzy's worldview as stated here? What do you think of this attitude towards Oliver? Would you behave differently in her shoes?
- What do you think of Izzy's reaction to her stepmother's pregnancy? Do you think it's possible to experience that news as a kind of loss?
- ". . . They think death is like the flu, and they don't want to catch it.'" What do you think of this simile? What are some examples of behavior it could describe?
- Describe Izzy's dream at the beginning of chapter 26. What do you think it means? Have you ever had a similar dream experience?
- How does Izzy's understanding of Aunt Felicia's suicide change over the course of the book? Did your understanding of suicide change as you read?

## About Music and Comedy

- Izzy wants to become a comedian and names several well-known comedians as her inspiration throughout this book. Are you familiar with any of them? Why do you think Izzy is drawn to stand-up comedy?
- Discuss the lyrics of "Be Always Tender," the first song Uncle Henderson ever wrote. How do these lyrics make you feel? What kind of music do you think they should be set to—fast or slow, major or minor key, etc.?
- Izzy's mom describes music as the thing that "straightened out" Uncle Henderson when he felt purposeless. Izzy thinks it was meeting Aunt Felicia. Who do you think is right?
- When Izzy and company arrive at Uncle Henderson's trailer, he's holding his guitar "like a shield." What do you think of this simile?